


**A  
Lincoln Memorial  
To  
Thanksgiving**



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# A Lincoln Memorial To Thanksgiving

Address Delivered at the Dedication

of the

Abraham Lincoln Statue, Hingham, Massachusetts

on

September 23, 1939

by

Louis A. Warren, Director, Lincoln National  
Life Foundation

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Few men achieve immortality. National heroes come and go; provincial celebrities live on in the memories of a few generations; but only at long intervals of time do personalities emerge who belong to the ages. We are here today to dedicate a monument to Abraham Lincoln, an immortal man.

Sir Spencer Walpole said, "Perhaps of all the men born of the Anglo-Saxon race in the nineteenth century, Mr. Lincoln deserves the highest place in History". Lord Curzon referred to one of Lincoln's addresses as "eloquence almost divine." He further stated that two of the three outstanding orations thus far delivered in the Anglo-Saxon tongue fell from the lips of Lincoln.

But a more remarkable Lincoln testimonial comes from a contemporary English historian. After H. G. Wells prepared his *Outline of History* and through painstaking research had made the acquaintance of the men of note who had lived since the achievements of civilization have been recorded, he was invited to select the six greatest figures in history. One of the six men chosen in this most exclusive list of immortal men was Abraham Lincoln.

There are seventy heroic bronze statues of Abraham Lincoln in America which portray him in many different characteristic poses. The most popular conception of Lincoln, for a study in bronze, has been The Emancipator. It is accepted generally that the Proclamation of Emancipation is the most important state paper which has been issued since the founders framed those famous writings which gave the nation form and also inspiration.

Recalling the prominent part which Massachusetts men played in moulding public sentiment for such a time as the Chief Executive should think it expedient to issue an order

looking to the freeing of the slaves, we would say that Boston offered a most congenial atmosphere for a statue of Lincoln The Emancipator.

Sixty years ago Thomas Ball's heroic bronze called "The Emancipation Group" was dedicated at Park Square in Boston. Through all these years it has stood as a symbol of freedom and has recalled to an ever increasing procession of observers the heroic effort made by the nation to guarantee the equality of all men.

There was another proclamation issued by Abraham Lincoln in 1863 which is even more closely associated with New England than the famous Proclamation of Emancipation.

Seventy-five years have passed since the Civil War President captured the New England spirit of "fruitful fields and healthful skies", and incorporated it in a Proclamation for the First Annual National Thanksgiving Day. During the observance of Thanksgiving for three-quarters of a century, this annual festival has brought good cheer into our homes, quickened our patriotic impulses, and given the nation an unusual opportunity to reaffirm its loyalty to the "beneficent Creator and Ruler of the Universe".

There seems to have been no general recognition of the part which Abraham Lincoln played in nationalizing Thanksgiving Day, an institution conceived by our New England forbears. We are here today in New England not far from Plymouth Rock. We are here in the fall of the year with tokens of the harvest everywhere about. We are here in a town that, for more than three hundred years, has been a Lincoln neighborhood, and we are here to dedicate a memorial to Abraham Lincoln. Would not the time and place elements associated with this bronze figure invite the rehearsal of certain facts relating to the naturalization of the old New England festival? It shall be our task in this dedicatory address to present Abraham Lincoln as the first sponsor of our National Thanksgiving Day.

It would be presumptuous for me here in New England to review the history of the Thanksgiving festival as practiced by our colonial fathers from that early day in 1621 when they first thanked God for food and clothes and life, up to that day when George Washington issued his famous Thanksgiving Proclamation calling upon the people to thank God for a constitutional form of government. We shall be interested primarily in reviewing briefly events which led up to the final nationalization of the day.

The persistent effort of Sarah Josepha Hale, a New England woman, contributed much to the building of a favorable public sentiment which eventually found expression in a national Thanksgiving Day observance. She was born in 1788, the year following Washington's memorable proclamation. Although left a widow at the age of thirty-four with five small children to support, she took a lively interest in public affairs and became an editor of note. In 1815, two years after

her marriage, she observed her first Thanksgiving Day, a day set apart by proclamation of President Madison who called upon the nation at the close of the war with England to offer thanks to God for the coming of Peace. There were no Presidential proclamations forthcoming, however, and it was not until the early forties that Mrs. Hale began her concerted effort on behalf of the festival. Partly due to her appeal governors of many states issued Thanksgiving proclamations at intervals, and some of them were quite consistent in setting apart a certain day in each year for the annual observance of the holy feast.

For twenty years Mrs. Hale labored diligently to emphasize the significance of a national Thanksgiving season. In a timely editorial prepared in 1852 she said: "Thanksgiving Day is the national pledge of Christian faith in God acknowledging him as the dispenser of blessings . . . . The observance of the day has been gradually extending and for a few years past, efforts have been made to have a fixed day, which will be universally observed throughout the whole country . . . . The last Thursday in November was selected as the day, on a whole, most appropriate."

Ten years later, in 1862, she was still pleading for a National Thanksgiving Day and reported that the preceding year the national Feast Day was celebrated in twenty-four states and three territories. Her supreme objective had not been reached, however, although she had observed that President Lincoln had issued several proclamations during the first two years of the war calling the people to prayer in their respective places of worship. In 1863, April 30 had been proclaimed a day of National Humiliation and Prayer and, after the victory at Gettysburg, August 6 was set apart as a day of "National Thanksgiving, praise and prayer". It must have been the Thanksgiving service for the Gettysburg victory that encouraged Mrs. Hale to appeal to President Lincoln on behalf of a National Thanksgiving Day in the fall of the year.

Although she had approached former Presidents with respect to setting aside a national holiday for praise and prayer, it was not until she appealed to Mr. Lincoln in 1863 that she found a sympathetic hearing. Thanksgiving Day in 1863 fell on November 26, just one week after the dedication of the Gettysburg Cemetery where Lincoln made his remarkable speech. It might be said that the Gettysburg Address was written in the atmosphere of the First National Thanksgiving season, as Lincoln's proclamation had already been penned when those few remarks at Gettysburg were prepared. Mrs. Hale must have been pleased to observe that in 1864 Lincoln again set aside the last Thursday in November as a day of Thanksgiving, thereby confirming the annual aspect of the day. Upon Lincoln's death she approached President Johnson and urged the day be observed in 1865.

Contemporary editors of various journals were at once conscious that Thanksgiving Day had become a national

institution with Lincoln's proclamation of 1863. This editorial appearing in Harper's Weekly confirms this viewpoint:

"It is a fortunate circumstance that our annual thank-offering festival has become a national affair in which the whole people participate upon a common day . . . We forget that we are states and come to offer tribute to God in our capacity as a nation. The festival thus becomes more significant not only in its altered character but in its larger suggestions and motives."

The names of five people should have prominence in tracing the evolution of Thanksgiving Day in America: Governor Bradford, the founder, representing the colonial era; President Washington, first executive to proclaim a national observance of the day; President Madison, for his revival of the institution; Mrs. Hale, for her life long efforts on behalf of a specific date; and President Lincoln, who established by his proclamation of 1863, the First Annual National Thanksgiving Day. Just here it would seem appropriate to quote this proclamation:

## PROCLAMATION FOR THANKSGIVING

OCTOBER 3, 1863

BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES  
OF AMERICA

### A Proclamation

The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften the heart, which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God. In the midst of a civil war of unequal magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign states to invite and provoke their aggressions, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theater of military conflict; while that theater has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union.

Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defense have not arrested the plow, the shuttle, or the ship; the ax has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. Population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the seige, and the battlefield, and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom.

No human counsel hath devised, nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the most high God, who while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.

It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American people. I do, therefore, invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens. And I recommend to them that, while offering up the ascriptions justly due to him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to his tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners, or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation, and to restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity, and union.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand, and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

[L.S.] Done at the city of Washington, this third day of October, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the independence of the United States the eighty-eighth.

A. LINCOLN

By the President: WILLIAM H. SEWARD,  
Secretary of State.

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While no one may question the importance of the part played by Abraham Lincoln in the establishment of our modern Thanksgiving Day, there may be those who wonder if he used good judgement in selecting a certain day in the month for the annual ceremony. Here again we find the place element coming to our rescue, as we are in the very shadow of the Old Ship Church, the oldest church in America used continuously for worship.

When Abraham Lincoln set apart the last Thursday in November as the first annual Thanksgiving festival, he was contributing to an ancient religious sentiment fostered by the apostolic church.

A period of solemnity was always observed with the coming of the advent season. Fasting and penance had been practiced during the advent period from time immemorial by the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran, the English, and the Protestant Episcopal churches.

As early as the sixth century, the first Sunday in advent was made the New Year's Day of the ecclesiastical calendar, and it always followed the last Thursday in November. The Friday and Saturday preceding Advent Sunday were fast days so the last Thursday in November became the last day of feasting in the church year. This fact made the day available as a day of thanksgiving festivities.

It is not strange that Washington, an Episcopalian, who was acquainted with the church calendar, chose with discretion this last Thursday in November as a day of thanksgiving and praise which he set apart by proclamation in 1789.

Lincoln was also familiar with the Episcopal calendar, and when he was urged to proclaim a day of national thanksgiving in 1863, a copy of Washington's proclamation of 1789 was made available to him. Lincoln not only issued his proclamation of Thanksgiving on October 3, the very same day of the month on which Washington had issued his, but he also set apart for the observance of the national festival the very same day, the last Thursday in November.

We are fortunate not only in the time of year selected for this dedication, and in the close proximity of Old Ship Church which contributes the proper spiritual atmosphere for the discussion of a festival which is primarily religious, but we have an unusual privilege of gathering for these exercises in the very town where the colonial Lincoln families settled. Thanksgiving has had a tremendous appeal in New England to the family circle until the annual Thanksgiving dinner has become the most significant of our national feasts. It would be difficult to conceive of a Thanksgiving memorial without the family idea finding expression.

Hingham has been a Lincoln settlement for more than three centuries and the name very early became a familiar one throughout New England. When in 1837 James Fenimore Cooper published his historical novel based on episodes at the beginning of the Revolutionary War, he chose as a name for his leading character, Lionel Lincoln, and the title of his book was "Lionel Lincoln" or "The Leaguer of Boston".

It would be impossible to write the early history of New England without giving the Lincoln family a major place in its development. It was Levi Lincoln, Sr., born at Hingham, who served as Attorney-General in Thomas Jefferson's cabinet. Two of Levi's sons, Levi, Jr. and Enoch, were contemporary Governors of Massachusetts and Maine respectively. Levi, Jr. served the Bay State as a Governor longer than any other incumbent before or since his time. There was also General Benjamin Lincoln, a resident of Hingham, familiar to every student of the American Revolution.

In 1848 Abraham Lincoln made his first visit to New England and was graciously entertained in the home of Levi Lincoln, Jr. at Worcester. Host and guest bearing the same

surname did not know that they were related. The westerner in later years referred to these New England cousins as "Those famous Lincolns of Massachusetts." The plain Illinois lawyer could not have surmised at that time that he was to become the most famous of all the Lincolns.

When Abraham Lincoln, descendant of Samuel Lincoln of Hingham, became President of the United States, Calvin Lincoln was serving as pastor of the Old Ship Church and for twenty-six years he ministered to its needs. The President chose Harvard as the proper place to educate his son, Robert Lincoln, and when the young man arrived in Cambridge, he found that Solomon Lincoln of Hingham was one of the instructors in this institution of learning.

When the President was assassinated, Honorable Frederick W. Lincoln, Jr. was Mayor of the City of Boston, to which exalted position he had been elected seven different times. Mayor Lincoln did not know, when he called a meeting of the City Council to take some action on the death of the President, that the eulogy he pronounced was on one of his own kinsmen, both Mayor and President tracing their ancestry back to Hingham.

A published list of the early settlers of the Town of Hingham reveals that one of the six original settlers in 1633 was a Lincoln. During the next five years there were more male inhabitants taking up their residence in Hingham than by any other name.

When the 250th anniversary of Hingham was celebrated in 1885, two of three officers of the general committee were named Lincoln, and the orator of the day was Solomon Lincoln. The preceding year a list of the legal voters revealed that there were 23 adult males bearing the name Lincoln then living in the town. Most of the older families of Hingham have intermarried with the Lincolns. Certainly no community in America is more directly associated with the Lincoln family.

The time of the year, the religious atmosphere, the family traditions all contribute much to this occasion and through the beneficence of the late E. E. Whitney, we have a magnificent statue of Lincoln to adorn this public square. Might not this statue placed near the Old Ship Church in this town of the Lincolns, not far from the very site where the Pilgrims landed, memorialize the proclaiming of the first annual national Thanksgiving Day which for 75 years has been observed on the last Thursday in November by Presidential proclamation?

Shortly after Mr. Keck completed his heroic bronze of Abraham Lincoln, I asked him if he had in mind while making the study any specific incident or episode in the life of Lincoln which he was attempting to visualize. He replied that it was but a sympathetic interpretation of Lincoln as President. Some time later I had the privilege of seeing a preliminary study from which this heroic figure was created. Imagine

my surprise when I discovered that in the earlier interpretation Lincoln held a manuscript in his hand. This, however, was removed later on for artistic symmetry. It was while observing this miniature Lincoln with a document in his hand that I was impressed by the reverent repose, the head inclined as if in communion with the divine presence. This, I said to myself, is the Lincoln who wrote the proclamation of Thanksgiving.

This reaction immediately called for a critical study of the statue to discover, if possible, any details which might mitigate a conclusion which had been hastily drawn, and, on the other hand, to find any characteristics which would support the supposition.

Any well informed student of Lincoln, familiar with his rapidly changing features caused by a task too great for human endurance and familiar with the manner in which he combed his hair which became more and more unruly as time went on, will immediately identify this heroic bronze statue as representing Abraham Lincoln during 1863, the year the proclamation was issued.

Seated on what might appear to be a fragment of Plymouth Rock itself, this bronze Lincoln contributes much to the Thanksgiving atmosphere. It is in its completeness rather than in any certain aspect that it makes its strongest appeal, and its grandeur will always rest in its simplicity, an old New England trait.

A year ago Dean Cornwell, American painter, was commissioned by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Co. to do a canvas portraying Lincoln proclaiming a national Thanksgiving Day. The Daughters of the American Revolution were so delighted with the work of art that they used a copy of it as a cover illustration for the November 1938 issue of their National Historical Magazine.

Sculptor Keck and Artist Cornwell have apparently been inspired by the same Lincoln—The President who signed the Thanksgiving proclamation in 1863. The spirit of this bronze, and the theme of the canvas, are hallowed with the attitude of divine meditation — a man alone with his God.

Thomas Ball's bronze group at Boston serves as an enduring monument to Lincoln's Proclamation of Emancipation. Charles Keck's heroic bronze statue at Hingham may well memorialize Lincoln's Proclamation of Thanksgiving. Here in the very town where his forebears first established their family circles in the New World and in the very front yard of Samuel Lincoln, his first American progenitor, Abraham Lincoln has come back to dwell among his kinsmen, to remind us all of those sacred institutions which have contributed so much to the spiritual uplift of the nation.



